

Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta: The Merchant and the Pilgrim

How did the predispositions of two famous medieval travelers color what they reported—and how they reported it? What was the most important difference and the most important similarity in the stories of these two travelers?



Today the word *travel* carries with it images of excitement: we can move hundreds of miles by automobile or thousands of miles by air in a few hours. When we arrive at our destination, we can usually relax comfortably in a home or motel. Such was not the case seven centuries ago, when the English word *travel* originally meant the same as *travail*, that is, hard work that exhausted the body and tested the will.¹ Imagine how stressful it would be to live “out of a suitcase” for over twenty years and in the process risk serious illnesses and survive dangers posed by bandits, shipwrecks, pirates, trackless deserts, and frozen mountains.

These were only some of the problems faced by the two most famous world travelers in the pre-modern period. In 1271, Italian Marco Polo (1254–1324) set out with his father and uncle on a journey to the court of the Mongol Emperor of China, Kubilai Khan; he would not return to his native Venice until 1295. In 1325, a year after Polo’s death, Islamic jurist Ibn Battuta (1304–1368) left his native city of Tangier in Morocco to begin a journey to the East that would take him a total of seventy-five thousand miles; he did not return home permanently until 1354.²

The thirteenth-century travels of Marco Polo and those of his fourteenth-century Muslim counterpart, Ibn Battuta, illustrate both the dangers travel posed in this period and the ways such dangers could be overcome. The Polo family was aided by the “Pax Mongolica,” the period of peace established by Mongol rulers in the

Asian steppelands from about 1250 to 1350. The strong control exercised by these rulers, in an empire which stretched from Persia to China, allowed the Polos safe passage to China and back. Fifty years later, when Ibn Battuta began his journey, the Pax Mongolica was more precarious, but hospitality and safety were provided to Muslims by a network of Muslim traders and rulers extending from Southeast Asia to the strait of Gibraltar.

Ibn Battuta traveled primarily in Muslim-ruled lands, the *Dar al-Islam* [House or Abode of Islam], while the Christian Polo, son of a European merchant, lived and worked in countries whose cultures and religions were foreign to him. This difference makes a comparison of their works most interesting. Marco Polo's knowledge of four Asian languages as well as Italian allowed him to communicate with foreigners and even work as an administrator for the Chinese emperor. Yet, in all his travels, he remained culturally an "outsider" to the peoples he met, and this fact enhanced his power of observation and stimulated his natural curiosity. By contrast, Ibn Battuta usually traveled as an "insider," and his hosts accepted him as a respected Muslim jurist (*qadi*) and student of Islamic mysticism (Sufism). Traveling to more than sixty Muslim courts, where he met rulers and their officials, Ibn Battuta was able to judge the behavior of his hosts in light of the Muslim scripture, the *Koran*, and the precepts of Islamic law. For him, the difference between their native cultures and his own North Arabic culture was of secondary importance.

We can be thankful that both men dictated accounts of their travels after they returned home—Polo, while in a Genoese prison in 1298, and Ibn Battuta, to a Moroccan scribe, Ibn Juzayy, 1354–1355. Since neither was trained to report objectively on the unusual customs of foreigners, both Polo and Ibn Battuta judged those they encountered by their own standards. Both travel accounts reveal the great diversity in Eurasian cultures during this period; both are laced with "miraculous" happenings and both amaze readers with fairly accurate accounts of the enormous wealth rulers had at their disposal. The chief difference between the two works is one of focus. Polo's *Travels* was written with a "merchant's eye for flourishing manufactures." It is marked, in the words of one biographer, with a "mercantile stamp."³ Polo tells us little about himself but much about the social and economic practices of those he meets. He systematically discussed commerce, government, and customs with

some attention to the spectacular and exotic. By contrast, Ibn Battuta focused on the purity of Islamic ritual and belief in the lands he visited. He was much more willing than was Polo to describe his own difficulties and good fortune and much less concerned with trade, commerce, and the forms of government. Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* (Arabic for *Travels*) described a personal journey, a pilgrimage. Indeed, Ibn Battuta began his journey intending to make only the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hadj*) required of all pious Muslims once in a lifetime.

Although Polo infused his *Travels* with a "mercantile spirit," he left Palestine in 1271 with a religious purpose. On an earlier journey to China, Marco's father, Nicolo, and his uncle Maffeo had been asked by the Great Khan (Kublai) to bring back to the Mongol court some holy oil from Jerusalem and "a hundred men of learning, thoroughly acquainted with the principles of the Christian religion," who could make a case for Christianity. Kublai Khan may have wished to compare the "wonders" of Christian priests with those of the holy men of other religions; evidence suggests, however, that his mother was a Christian, and his requests could have reflected a genuine interest in learning more about her faith.⁴ Western Christian leaders, for their part, hoped to convert the Mongols to Christianity and use them as allies against the "infidel" Muslim Turks, whose lands lay between Christian Europe and China. Although such hopes were unrealistic, Pope Gregory X supplied the Polos with two priests and some oil from Jerusalem's shrine of the Holy Sepulchre; the priests, fearing attack, abandoned the Polos after traveling only a few hundred miles.

Without the priests, but with the oil and valuable "safe conduct" passes earlier provided by the Khan, the Polos crossed Asia Minor and reached the Persian city of Tabriz in 1272. From there they headed south to Hormuz on the Persian Gulf to take a ship to Southeast Asia and China. However, when they discovered that the Arab ships were held together with rope yarn instead of nails, they decided to travel overland through central Asia (Afghanistan and Tibet).

In Baku, southwest of the Caspian Sea, Polo encountered his first natural wonder, petroleum, which was used "as an unguent for the cure of rashes in men and cattle . . . and [was] . . . also good for burning." On the road to Hormuz, he encountered—as did Ibn Battuta decades later—the simoon, or "drying wind," of the desert, which could not only suffocate men but also dry out their

corpses so that their limbs would fall off when men tried to remove them for burial.⁵ While traveling through the Pamir Mountains and the Gobi Desert, the Polo party encountered the hardships associated with travels in thinly populated lands. In eastern Afghanistan, Marco fell ill and took a full year to recover; this is one of the few times in the *Travels* that he mentions his personal misfortunes. After leaving the city of Balach, the Polos entered a country where the people had fled to the mountains to escape bandits. As a consequence, local provisions were scarce and travelers had to carry enough food with them for themselves and their cattle. In the Pamir Mountains, the Polos saw no birds and noticed that their fires gave less heat because they were 15,600 feet above sea level. The Gobi Desert seemed to the Polos a place of hallucinations, "the abode of many evil spirits which lure travelers to their destruction with the most extraordinary illusions."⁶

The Polos were relieved once they left the Gobi and entered the northern Chinese province of Tangut (Gansu). There the party safely spent over a year, and the Polos had ample time to observe provincial customs and the many religions of the people: some of them were Saracens [Muslim], some were Nestorian Christian, and some were "idolaters" [Buddhists]. For the first time, Polo came upon a new fibre (asbestos), which "when woven into cloth and thrown in the fire . . . does not burn." But what fascinated the young traveler most were the marriage and sexual customs of the Asians. He recorded that, in Pem in central Asia, a woman could take another husband if her first husband was absent from home twenty days. "On the same principle," he added, men "marry wherever they happen to reside." In places, Polo found men willing to offer wives and daughters to strangers passing through. They believed this practice was "agreeable to their deities" and would bring them wealth and good fortune. The women, he added knowingly, were "very handsome, very sensual."⁷ Polo described most of these customs matter-of-factly. In one Southeast Asian land he later visited, he calmly reported that no young woman could be married until "she has first been tried by the king." If the king liked her, he kept her around for a time, then dismissed her with a sum of money that would allow her to make an "advantageous match" within her class. Polo also noted that the king had 326 children. However, Polo was personally offended by a custom he encountered in Kanzhou, China. There men took as many as thirty wives and often married

close relatives, even mothers-in-law. Polo considered this "like the beasts of the field." He also described as "scandalous" the Tibetan dislike of virgins; they expected unmarried girls to "have had previous relations with many of the opposite sex." This practice of judging a woman attractive on the basis of "the number of lovers she had" was due, he believed, to Tibetan paganism.⁸ Polo did appreciate the strict marriage customs of the Mongols, which contrasted sharply with those of other Asians. Mongol women "excelled in chastity and decency of conduct," he wrote, and husbands remained loyal to their wives, though they could have as many of them as they could afford.⁹

Although Marco Polo claims to have worked for Kubilai Khan for seventeen years, some of his tales of Mongol China strained the credibility of his readers—both in his own day and in ours.¹⁰ It might be appropriate to praise Kubilai Khan as a "man of proved integrity, great wisdom, commanding eloquence, and celebrated valor." However, to say that he was so virtuous that "wherever he went he found people disposed to submit to him" is carrying admiration a bit far.¹¹ Generally, however, Polo's account of the history, military organization, and social customs of the Mongols was accurate, even though his description of the Khan's court and its activities may have been exaggerated. Polo's European readers would later have trouble believing Polo's statement that Kubilai Khan kept a stud farm of ten thousand horses and mares, all "white as snow." They were also skeptical of Polo's claim that the Khan hunted with ten thousand falconers and hosted a state dinner so large that forty thousand people had to eat outside the hall. Yet, when one considers the size of the Mongol empire, of which China was only a part, Polo's estimates might be only slightly exaggerated. It is quite possible, despite the ridicule of Venetians, who referred to Marco as "il Milione," the man who speaks in millions, that Kubilai Khan's postal system (something like the American pony express) used two hundred thousand horses to supply ten thousand stations across Asia. It is also quite possible that the city of Hangzhou included 1,600,000 families and that some Tibetan monasteries housed up to 500 monks.¹²

Marco Polo saw much of China when he was sent by the Khan on two long inspection tours, the first southwest through the modern provinces of Sichuan and Yunnan into Burma and the second southeast from Khanbalig, the site of modern Beijing, to the coastal

cities of Kinsai and Zaiton (modern Hangzhou and Amoy). In describing these trips, as well as the journey home by sea through Southeast Asia and along the Indian coast, Polo's reporting followed a pattern. He opened with an account of the religion, government, and economic and commercial activity of the peoples he encountered. For example, he noted that, in the city of Nanjing, China, "the people are idolaters [Buddhists], use paper money . . . are subjects of the Great Khan, and are largely engaged in commerce. They have raw silk, and weave tissues of silver and gold. . . . The country produces a great deal of corn [grain]." Later, in discussing the island of Sumatra, Polo wrote:

In this island there are eight kingdoms, each governed by its own king, and each with its own language. The people are idolaters. It contains an abundance of riches and all sorts of spices, aloes wood, sapanwood for dyeing, and various other kinds of drugs, which, on account of the length of the voyage and the danger . . . are not imported into our country, but which find their way to the provinces of Manzi [South China] and Cathay [North China].¹³

Polo's account of conditions in Kinsai (Hangzhou) was particularly detailed. The city had a perimeter of a hundred miles, contained ten large marketplaces, and possessed paved roads that were guarded by watchmen on the lookout for fires. Polo was very impressed with both the well-organized government and the wealth of this trading center. On the door of his home, each head of household in Kinsai had to list the names of family members and the number of horses owned, so that authorities could keep constant track of city growth. The wealth of the city is suggested by the amount of pepper brought daily to the city; forty-three boatloads, each weighing 243 pounds, arrived daily. Kubilai Khan took in millions in revenue from this one city alone.¹⁴

Despite Marco Polo's focus on imports, exports, and local industries within the confines of Eurasia, he remained a child of his age—an age when people in every culture were fascinated with "miracles" and "wonders." One critic suggests that Polo preferred to write about the "popular culture" of everyday life rather than the "high culture" of Asia because he himself was culturally unsophisticated.¹⁵ Polo never discussed art, philosophy, or literature, for example, but enjoyed mentioning such things as tattooing and cannibalism. While Polo did uncritically repeat stories of the mirac-

ulous, it is also true that most of his readers in fourteenth-century Europe believed them. They enjoyed reading about the one-eyed cobbler who saved the Christians in Baghdad from certain death by accepting a challenge from the Muslim caliph, praying, and moving a mountain. Polo's Christian readers were edified by his story of how the Church of St. John the Baptist in Samarkand remained standing after Christians complied with the order of the Muslim ruler to remove a portion of a central supporting pillar. These miracle stories are more credible than other Polo tales based on sheer fantasy: the existence of two islands 500 miles south of India, one inhabited only by males, and another thirty miles away inhabited only by females, or of birds on Madagascar large enough to pick up elephants in their talons and drop them on rocks to kill them.¹⁶

It is interesting that both Polo and his Muslim counterpart, Ibn Battuta, noted some of the same marvels during their journeys. How must contemporaries have viewed stories of dog sleds in Siberia, the practice of sati in Hindu India [widows throwing themselves on their husbands' funeral fires], or the burning of strange black stones (coal) to heat houses?¹⁷ These things must have seemed as strange to the people of the fourteenth-century as moving mountains by prayer does to us.

The Polo party left China in 1292, charged by the emperor with delivering a new wife to Arghun, Khan of Persia. Supplied with large ships and many servants, the Polos took twenty-one months to complete their journey because of a five-month delay on the island of Sumatra. During the trip, nearly 600 members of the party died from various unspecified causes, but Marco Polo, his father, and his uncle finally returned to Venice, where they ended their lives as ordinary merchants.¹⁸

Ibn Battuta's journey, begun thirty years later, took him to more places than the Polos had visited. After leaving his home in the Moroccan coastal town of Tangier in 1325, Ibn Battuta wandered through the Nile valley and Syria and arrived in Mecca in 1326 for the first of four pilgrimages to that Holy City. During the next year, he visited Persia [then a Mongol state] and Iraq but returned to Mecca to engage in further study and religious meditation. Between 1328 and 1332, Ibn Battuta sailed southward down the east African coast to Kilwa and then turned back to visit Turkey, the Crimea, southern Russia, and the city of Constantinople. In 1333, he was in India, where he spent a number of years as the *qadi*, or Muslim

judge, of Delhi. This largely honorific post paid well but also required him to spend much of his own money. Soon Ibn Battuta had a dangerous falling-out with the sultan of Delhi which nearly cost him his life; he returned to favor in 1341, when he was asked by the sultan to head a delegation to the emperor of China. Because of further adventures along the Mallabar (southwest) coast of India and in the Maldiv Islands and Ceylon (Sri Lanka), the ambassador did not arrive in China until 1345, where he spent most of his time in the south. Between 1346 and 1349, the Arab jurist returned via Mecca to Tunis in North Africa and, during the next five years, he crossed the Sahara to visit Mali, a black African Islamic state in the western Sudan. In 1354, he returned to Morocco, where he completed dictating his *Travels* by December 1355.¹⁹

Since Ibn Battuta was a pilgrim, the central theme of his narrative is the insistence that one must live a properly pious, Muslim life. He expected his fellow Muslims to be devout in attending prayer services, to keep their women modest, and to show hospitality to strangers.

In his travels, Ibn Battuta liked to visit with Islamic holy men (pious shaykhs) and view the tombs of holy men. In Cairo, Ibn Battuta visited the "great cemetery of al-Qarafa . . . a place of particular sanctity" containing "the graves of innumerable scholars and pious believers." At Hebron he discovered the graves of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their respective wives.²⁰ The bad grammar used by a preacher at Basra near the Persian Gulf bothered him, but he was glad that the Khwarizmians in central Asia beat people who failed to show up for Friday prayer service. During periods of crisis or while waiting to begin another leg of his journey, Ibn Battuta spent hours, even days, reciting the *Koran*. When serving as *qadi* in the Maldiv Islands, he had those who missed prayer services beaten; he also tried to get women to dress modestly but they refused to cover themselves completely except when they were in his court.²¹

Throughout the *Rihla*, Ibn Battuta carefully noted which rulers and officials respected his status as a pilgrim and extended hospitality to him. Indeed, without the generosity of his hosts, he could not have continued traveling. Sultan Abu Sa'id of Iraq gave him a robe, a horse, and other provisions when he found out that Ibn Battuta was going to Mecca. One of the ruler's wives in Qaysariya in Iraq gave Ibn Battuta's party a meal and then presented him with a

horse, with saddle and bridle, and money. In western Turkey, he stayed with a sultan who "every night sent us food, fruit, sweetmeats, and candles, and gave me in addition a hundred pieces of gold [and] a complete set of garments. . . ." Sultan Abu'l-Muzaffar Hasan at Kilwa was also praised for "his gifts and generosity"; this leader devoted "the fifth part of the booty made on his expeditions to pious and charitable purposes, as is prescribed in the *Koran*, and I have seen him give the clothes off his back to a mendicant who asked for them."²²

Except for the times when he had been robbed or shipwrecked, Ibn Battuta traveled in style. He customarily journeyed with slaves of both sexes, many of them gifts to him or to his companions. While in Afghanistan, Ibn Battuta reported that his party "had about 4000 horses" as well as some camels. When sent to China as ambassador of the sultan of Delhi, Ibn Battuta took gifts of 100 horses, 200 slaves and dancing girls, fifteen eunuchs [castrated males], twelve hundred pieces of cloth, gold, silver, and other assorted presents. When Ibn Battuta visited "Adam's Foot," a mountain in Ceylon [modern Sri Lanka] revered by Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims, he received an escort of four Hindu yogis, three Brahman priests, ten guards, and fifteen men to carry provisions.²³

Ibn Battuta shared his personality with his readers more readily than did Marco Polo, and his text suggests he was a reasonably complex person. A lover of religious truth, correct ritual, and dogma, Ibn Battuta was also "fond of pleasure and uxorious" [inclined to dote on someone]. A recent scholar notes his "well-timed unctuousness" [excessively pious, smooth, or oily manner] and suggests that he may have wanted rulers to treat him with great honor because, in fact, he felt insecure about his own level of learning and legal abilities. While serving as a *qadi* in Delhi, for example, he was untrained in the particular school of law practiced there and could not even speak the language.²⁴ If it is true that this world traveler was personally insecure, it is remarkable that he tells us as much about his personal life as he does. He did not hide the fact that he flattered rulers in return for their money and favors. Yet Ibn Battuta was not a cynical politician but, like Marco Polo, a genuinely curious person who loved travel for its own sake and who could be sincerely generous and open with people. On the two chief occasions when he got in trouble with rulers, at Delhi and in the Maldiv Islands, he attempted to play a political role for which

he was unsuited. It is not surprising that he retreated to the life of a hermit after his narrow escape in Delhi and that he reentered the sultan's service to head the embassy to China because of his "love of travel and sight-seeing."²⁵

Like Marco Polo, Ibn Battuta loved to share his discoveries with the readers; he, too, saw oil in Iraq and pearl divers in the Indian Ocean. He described the way Arab ships were built in the Persian Gulf and contrasted them with Chinese ships on which he later traveled. The strangest thing he saw was a slave in Southeast Asia who gave a long, flattering speech before his ruler and then cut his own throat—as a way of showing his great love for the sultan. This demonstration of loyalty was rewarded, for his family was given a large pension.²⁶

The different personalities of Polo and Ibn Battuta are reflected in quite different styles of reporting. For example, in his accounts of the city of Quilon on the west coast of India, Polo the merchant commented on the amount of dyewood and fruit, as well as on the palm wine that "makes one drunk faster than the wine from grapes." He also noted the inhabitants' nakedness, except for a loin-cloth, and the fact that they marry close relatives. Ibn Battuta, by contrast, told the reader little about the flora, fauna, or people of Quilon. We are told that he arrived there after missing a ship in Calicut and losing nearly all his possessions; the most memorable thing about Quilon for Ibn Battuta was the quarrelsome, drunken porter who took him there from Calicut.²⁷

As this example illustrates, while there is more ego evident in the *Rihla* than in Polo's *Travels*, Ibn Battuta's book contains more detailed cultural information and more exciting stories. Nowhere in Polo's book, for example, can one find a story to rival Ibn Battuta's account of how he escaped near death from bandits as he was leaving Delhi on his mission to China. After being pursued by and out-running ten horsemen, he was then captured by forty bowmen and taken to their camp, where several men were assigned to kill him. His assassins lost their nerve, however, and allowed him to escape after he gave one of them (literally) the shirt off his back. He then wandered the countryside for six days, at one point eluding a band of fifty armed Hindus by hiding in a cotton field all day, until a kindly Muslim found him, took him home, and sent word to the members of his party, who returned and picked him up.²⁸ This close brush with death is only one of a half dozen reported in the

Rihla; whether caused by illness, pirates, treacherous guides, stormy seas, or crocodiles, they are all presented believably but dramatically in the narrative.²⁹

Both the merchant and the pilgrim give us a clear appreciation of how travelers, whether Christian or Muslim, merchant or jurist, viewed the world in the later medieval period. For both men, the world was a truly marvelous and sometimes miraculous place, where fact and fantasy intermingled in a way we find incomprehensible today. Even though they are not always reliable witnesses and were not writing history as we understand that term, both world travelers are praised by modern scholars for the practical information they recorded. In his book *The Discoverers*, historian Daniel Boorstin says of Marco Polo's book: "Never before or since has a single book brought so much authentic new information, or so widened the vistas for a continent." Other authors mention that a well-thumbed and annotated copy of Polo's *Travels* was found in Christopher Columbus's private library; the book may have helped Columbus decide to sail west to reach Asia because it describes Japan as a good fifteen hundred miles east of China. That would have placed it about where the Americas are located—if we take into account the smaller globe that Columbus would have used. Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* gives us the only information we have on many Muslim states in this period, especially those in West Africa and along the west coast of India.³⁰ Yet, despite the practical value of these two travel works, we should remember that they were written to entertain and to edify. Although Polo's work excited Europeans on the eve of an era of discovery and exploration, and Ibn Battuta's work confirmed for Muslims the essential religious unity of the *Dar al-Islam*, each man wrote to please himself and to charm his readers. That, as much as the information they contain, is what makes these two travel narratives interesting reading today.

Notes

1. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Discoverers* (New York: Random House, 1983), 125.
2. Ibn Battuta's full name was Abu 'Abdallah Muhammad ibn Abdallah ibn Muhammad ibn Ibrahim al-Lawati ibn Battuta. In Arabic, "ibn" means "son of" and Lawata was the name of his particular Berber